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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the philosophical foundations and implications of fantasy theme analysis, introduced by Ernest B. Bormann in 1972. The paper rejects the appropriation of fantasy theme analysis as compatible with, or as support for the philosophical position of relativism and relativist rhetorical theories. Rather, it suggests that fantasy theme analysis is more appropriately grounded in an objectivist philosophical position and in the theory of rhetoric known as perspective realism. After a detailed discussion of these issues, the paper concludes by suggesting how fantasy theme analysis would function more productively as a critical theory based on perspective realism and by recommending for future research, a study of the applications of fantasy theme analysis in scholarly journals to see if the components of perspectivism identified in Bormann's theory are evidenced in its application. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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Perspective Realism and the Rhetorical Vision: a Philosophical Foundation for Fantasy Theme Analysis

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Fantasy theme analysis has been a popular method of criticism since its introduction by Ernest B. Bormann in 1972. At its twentieth anniversary, it still provides fodder for scholarly reflection, as this panel attests. Fantasy theme analysis has grown and changed in the course of the last two decades and, as we debate issues of meta-theory, we can look again to it because it continues to explain important dimensions of our rhetoric.

In this essay, I explore the philosophical foundations and implications of fantasy theme analysis. I shall reject the appropriation of fantasy theme analysis as compatible with, or as support for, the philosophical position of relativism and relativist rhetorical theories. I will suggest that fantasy theme analysis is more appropriately grounded in an objectivist philosophical position and in the theory of rhetoric known as perspective realism. I will conclude by suggesting how fantasy theme analysis would function more productively as a critical theory based on perspective realism.

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I. Relieved of Relativism.

Although rhetoricians have become increasingly aware of the ontological and epistemological implications of their work over

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past few decades, there has been little discussion of these issues as they relate to fantasy theme analysis. However in his last published statement on fantasy theme analysis and symbolic convergence theory, Bormann seems to align the theory with subjectivist or relativist epistemological views. Contending that fantasy theme analysis akin to recent work on narrative rhetoric he states: "The theory explains the appearance of a group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individual daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies" (Bormann 1985b, 128).

Barry Brummett, in his influential 1976 article, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," has argued that human reality is not objective. Rather he argues that "reality is meaning," and "this meaning is taken from personal experience and communication about it with others, the sharing of meaning" (29). Brummett construed Bormann's ideas of rhetorical vision and fantasy themes to support the notion that reality is subjective (or intersubjective), created by people through the use of rhetoric: "Bormann has essentially agreed in arguing that the most meaningful reality to people will often not be 'facts' or objective reality but rather the rhetorical reality created by communication" (Brummett 1976, 31). Of course, Bormann's first article on the subject was titled "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality" (Bormann 1972), but Bormann made no direct epistemological claims in the essay.

Contrary to Brummett's analysis, I will argue that Bormann's work on fantasy theme analysis actually presumes an objective reality to exist -- a reality which exists prior to the generation of a group's rhetorical vision. Central to my argument is the observation that the fantasy theme methodology is based on *comparing* the vision of a group *to* some objective measure, which Bormann seems to suggest is a knowable reality, existing outside humans. Indeed, as we shall see, without the assumption of an objective reality, Bormann's methodology would be reduced to saying that everyone has a radically different reality, and criticism would merely be pointing out details of difference. If a subjectively relative analysis could be conducted at all, as Stephen Toulmin pointed out, there would be no standard for assessing an argument (Toulmin 1972, 92).

The essential difference between Brummett and Bormann is in the fact that Brummett eschews any notion of objective reality, while Bormann measures the interpretation, salience, and significance of fantasy themes and rhetorical visions *against* real world objects and events which are their antecedents. In other words, rhetorical constructs such as fantasy themes or rhetorical visions *constitute* reality for Brummett, but for Bormann the same concepts *interpret* or *give clues* to the working of reality. Brummett's interpretation does not account for Bormann's description of a rhetorical vision as containing a group's ideal world, and that it serves to motivate and direct the behavior of the group. For example, *in* the real world both Democrats and Republicans may include dominance of both houses of

congress and the Presidency in their rhetorical visions, but neither acts as if it were currently existing reality. Instead, these *socially constructed* "realities" serve to measure the two parties' goals and direct their political efforts to *change* the *real* social context in which the respective rhetorical communities find themselves. Bormann's notion of rhetorical vision occurs in a group's response to the real world.

II. Perspectives envisioned.

Philosopher Evander B. McGilvary offers a brief definition of perspectives:

> Perhaps perspective realism can be provisionally defined as a philosophical theory that regards every experience, including the experience of a philosophical theory, as the real objective world appearing in the perspective of an experiencing organism (McGilvary 1956, 6).

For McGilvary, alternative descriptions of the world do not mean that individuals and cultures *create* their reality, only that they see different aspects of the *same* objective reality from different perspectives. Once it is understood that Bormann's theory operates *within the context* of an objectively *real* world and that this real world impinges on the process of chaining fantasy themes and forming rhetorical visions, we can look toward objectivist or realist rhetorical epistemologies to enhance our understanding of fantasy theme analysis. One such epistemology is the view know as perspective realism and its rhetorical counterpart, rhetorical perspectivism. A salient connection between fantasy theme analysis and perspective realism is the use of the optical terms "vision" and "perspective". In a basic way, the rhetorical vision of a group is evidence of it's

perspective of reality. Inversely, the group's perspective of reality can be discerned through its rhetorical vision.

Let us return to Bormann and his method of rhetorical criticism, and examine its philosophical and epistemological assumptions. I say "assumptions" because Bormann seems to deliberately eschew developing a philosophical foundation. He *does* provide some theoretical framework, answering some criticism (Mohrmann 1980, 1982), in the notion of symbolic convergence. By his own admission, "it is thus a social theory of communication," it is social not philosophical (Bormann 1985b, 128).

Bormann has written two major updates on his methodology (Bormann 1982, 1985a). In his book *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream* (1985a), Bormann describes the purpose of fantasy theme analysis:

> My purpose is to illuminate how individuals talk with one another about their here-and-now concerns until they come to share a common consciousness and create a sense of identity and community, how they then use communication to raise the consciousness of inquirers until the latter convert to the new consciousness, and how they use communication to sustain the converted and keep them committed to the established vision.

Notice the clear reference to the here and now. Bormann distinctly differentiates between the communication *about* an object and the *object* of communication: "individuals talk ... about their here-and-now concerns". He does not express any interest in identifying how reality is constructed, as Brummett conjectured. For Bormann, the real world has substance and is confronted by the individuals who can talk about it. To put it

simply, fantasy themes are about reality, particularly a social reality.

The affinity of fantasy theme analysis and perspective realism is additionally illustrated in perspective realism's notion of *relationality.* According to this tenet, language operates to make *relationships* salient to rhetors and audiences. Rhetoric may report on aspects of the world itself, as when we perceive a "chair," as well as report on our emotional, individual, ideological interpretation of the world, as when we say "lovely chair." The relational aspect of perspective realism, then, draws the clear distinction between *seeing* and *seeing as* (Cherwitz 1990, 70). The physical perception of the object is different than the conscious interpretation or apprehension of the object. Because we do not immediately see the face of the "old woman" hidden in the drawing of the "girl," does not mean that it does not exist. Once we view the picture from a different perspective, the other face can be seen as well. Bormann gives realism presumption in the previously quoted statement of purpose by recognizing that an object's existence is not dependent on the individual's talk about it. It is no more real because it is talked about. Instead, such talk has elicited awareness of an alternative perspective present in the object and its relationality to the world which was there all along.

What are the advantages of a realist account of fantasy theme analysis over a relativist or subjectivist account? For one, realism "preserves the real world of rhetorical praxis, where both object seen and object seen as influence humans and

contribute to their rhetoric" (Cherwitz 1990, 70). Bormann's implied acceptance of this position thus gives him the subject of his methodology. Retaining a distinction between fantasy and the reality that the fantasy is *about* permits Bormann to use the fantasy theme methodology to investigate rhetors' relationships to the real world around them. Bormann can thus escape the interminable linguistic regress that would be entailed if his theory were grouped in a subjectivist/relativist epistemology such a Brummett's. In other words, the benefit of conceiving fantasy theme analysis as a perspective realist theory is that it can tell us not just about linguistic fantasies that are about linguistic fantasies, but that it can tell us about linguistic fantasies that are about the life and experience of the persons involved in the fantasy. It can tell us about how persons relate, not just to language, but to the complex world of reality in which they live.

The relational nature of perspective realism allows us to examine the object, the observer, and the rhetoric of the observer, without treating the observer's rhetoric as the sole constituent/antecedent of reality. Instead, the world is taken to include rhetors, rhetoric, and things in constant interrelationship. As Cherwitz and Hikins have put it:

> The world is comprised of many particulars, each a member of a context of particulars, and each deriving its nature from that context. Each particular exhibits various characters which themselves emerge wholly as a function of the relations in which the particular stands to there members of its context (Cherwitz and Hikins 1983, 252).

By understanding the real world as separate from the observer yet as existing *in relation to* the observer, we can examine that relationship without intersubjectivity and without the harmful dualisms characteristic of non-relational, positivistic, aperspectival realisms of the past. (Cherwitz and Hikins 1983, 258).

Another advantage of considering fantasy theme analysis from the vantage point of perspective realism is the inherent compatibility between perspectival realism's account of consciousness or mental events and the psychological dimension of fantasy theme analysis and symbolic convergence which "consists of the factors that explain why people share the fantasies they do when they do" (Bormann 1985b, 129). Bormann mentions "consciousness" when he states the purpose of fantasy theme analysis in the previous quote. He seems to use it with more than one connotation. It is important to differentiate the uses of consciousness so that we do not seem to be returning to the notion of intersubjectivity. Perspective realism addresses the concept:

> Consciousness is a natural event which occurs when and only when an entity comes to stand in a particular relationship to other entities within a context of particulars. Consciousness is itself a character of a specific kind and is always part of a corresponding asymmetrical relation also of a specific kind (Cherwitz and Hikins 1983, 252).

It is important to see that consciousness is postulated in terms of a relationship between objects in the real world, and is itself a specific kind of relationship. Specifically, it is the relationship of all the components in complex physical systems

(such as central nervous systems) that, because of these relationships, organize reality.

To give a complete account of a given person's consciousness "would entail a description of all the entities and relationships among entities which have a significant bearing on the conscious event" (Cherwitz and Hikins 1983, 253). Being able to give such a description, more or less completely, would make it possible to describe the shared or common relationships with other persons as well. So we can see the possibility of "shared consciousness" as described by Bormann, which would work in the dynamics of group interaction to produce a "sense of identity and community"(Bormann 1985a, 3). If these relata can be described, then they can become the subject of communication. Communication would then be a set of *inter*relationships among sentient beings.

As Bormann uses the term, "consciousness raising" would then involve one individual describing to another those relata which they both have in common. Such activity would attempt to alter, supplement, or correct the perspective the other holds of an object. Thus we can understand the "established vision" of Bormann in terms of similarities in consciousness at the level of relata. As the relata change, so does the consciousness of the group (the converted) and so the common consciousness must change too. Groups come to share perspectives.

A rhetorical vision has been defined by others who have used fantasy theme analysis as the "total dramatistic explanation of *reality*" (Cragan and Shields 1981, 3, emphasis added). Bormann has said: "A rhetorical vision is a unified putting-together of

various scripts that gives the participants a broader view of *things*" (1985b, 133, emphasis added) Again, note that reality is given presumption; dramatistic explanations are explanations of *reality*. It is when a group shares a description of this reality that the description becomes a vision. The description of that reality is accomplished and evidenced through rhetoric. Since the critic cannot directly access the cognitions of an individual, group, or social movement, the rhetoric of such individuals or groups must be evidence of the vision. While not precisely synonymous, shared consciousness and rhetorical vision are clearly related.

Another advantage of seeing fantasy theme analysis as a method arising out of perspective realism is the more powerful analysis such a strategy offers for understanding such notions as social reality, intersubjectivity, and social constructivism. Perspective realism denies that a rhetors linguistic description of reality or an audience's response to rhetoric are wholly or necessarily *socially* constructed. The mistake is made in considering a rhetorical description of reality as the *end* of the communicative process which results in socially constituted reality. While some rhetorical constructions do conform to this model, I would argue that they are confined to imaginary narratives such as fairy tales. But the whole purpose of critical distinctions among such items as truth telling/lying, expedient/inexpedient, productive/unproductive, advantageous/disadvantageous, and the like, collapses if our rhetoric is held to be *just* social constructions.

Rhetorical perspectivism sees rhetoric as a subtle combination of objectively existent reality *and* our social interests in it. Social realities are, in effect, the perspectives which different societal groups entertain of various social phenomena "... such social realities are to be viewed as more or less complete expositions of one perhaps limited perspective." (Cherwitz and Hikins 1983, 266) Cherwitz and Hikins, consonant with Bormann's approach, subsume the notion of social reality in the concepts of perspective and rhetorical vision.

We might casually look at the term "fantasy" as being the natural opposite of "reality", so how can we ground the methodology of rhetorical criticism called fantasy theme analysis in the philosophy of perspective realism? Bormann defines fantasy specifically:

> Fantasy is a technical term in the symbolic convergence theory and does not mean what it often does in ordinary usage, that is something imaginary, not grounded in reality. The technical meaning for fantasy is the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need (Bormann 1985a, 5).

Again, Bormann refutes the wholly constructionist version of intersubjectivity by defining fantasy as something which is indeed "grounded in reality". It is the interpretation of *events*, a dramatic way of describing the relata of consciousness shared by a group. From his first discussion of fantasy, Bormann clearly has given the "here-and-now" real world presumption. Rhetoric does not operate *against*, but *with* this presumption. An objective reality is required for people to have something to

create fantasies *about* (Bormann 1970). Notice that we could not say fantasize, because that would return us to the connotation of the word which would be "not real", or in philosophical terms, *anti-realist*.

Still another advantage of conceiving fantasy theme analysis from the vantage point of perspective realism is the understanding it affords us of group process, especially dramatization. It is in the rhetoric of a group that the critic finds dramatizations about the real world. The purpose of fantasy is to interpret or give meaning to group activity as a response to real world exigencies. Perspectivist philosophy accounts for this function of rhetoric : "Rhetorical discourse can perform the functions of appraising and making conspicuous the relations among objects of reality existing independently of conscious, thinking human beings" (Cherwitz and Hikins 1986, 105).

We can call group dramatizations fantasies, and when they recur in a group's rhetoric, Bormann calls that chaining: "The content of the dramatizing message that sparks the fantasy chain is called a fantasy theme" (Bormann 1985, 5). Rather than say a group *fantasizes*, which would denote an exclusion of reality, Bormann chooses to say *fantasy chaining* which would describe a group's use of fantasy material to make sense of its place in the real world through rhetoric. For example, the democrats do not fantasize about winning the White House, but in their rhetoric, the fantasy of winning the White House chains out, affording them

a vision of the way *reality* could be, and providing a goal for the future.

With a foundation in perspective realism and its theory of consciousness, we can establish the nature of rhetorical vision in the expression of shared or common consciousness through rhetoric. Thus we arrive at the description of rhetorical vision with this philosophical foundation more directly than does Bormann (1985a, 3-9) who does so without such a foundation. Instead, Bormann is largely content to focus on the sociological and psychological description of the constituents of symbolic convergence. A brief outline of how the theory proceeds in stages may illustrate my point.

In developing the theory of symbolic convergence, Bormann answers some of the early criticisms of fantasy theme analysis (Mohrmann 1980, 1982a&b). However, his theory development does not adequately address the philosophical questions we have been considering. He goes from the nature of fantasies and the act of chaining, to fantasy themes, "the content of the dramatizing message that sparks the fantasy chain" (1985a, 4), from which the methodology derives its name. Next he moves to symbolic cues, which trigger a reference to a theme on the part of a group, then to fantasy types, which are "stock scenarios repeated again and again". Once these concepts are established, Bormann can claim "the appearance of fantasy types in a body of discourse is an indication of the emergence of a rhetorical vision" (1985a, 7). Finally, the rhetorical vision can then be referenced by a master analogy (1985, 8).

We can see that the intervening steps from fantasy to rhetorical vision require acceptance of Bormann's terms and definitions at each stage of the theory's development. While being descriptive of the functioning of rhetoric in groups, these terms and definitions apparently can be applied at each step in the analysis in serial fashion. On the other hand, if we conceive of the fantasy theme from the point of view of perspective realism, the critic can "get at" the rhetoric, and perhaps comprehend its "master analogy," more directly because of the nature of its relationship to human consciousness and the reality such consciousness is about.

An individual or group's perspective or rhetorical vision can be more directly accessed through their rhetoric because as Cherwitz and Hikins argue, "Rhetoric describes in language [more or less directly] the way the world is [or could or should be] from the perspective of an individual rhetor" (Cherwitz and Hikins 1986, 108). Here the perspective evidenced in rhetoric can be called the group's rhetorical vision. The benefits of Bormann's methodology and use of rhetorical visions can be claimed without resorting to symbolic convergence theory or the intervening steps illustrated previously.

Bormann's claim that group members use rhetorical visions to convert and sustain the converted is also accounted for in a more parsimonious fashion in perspective realism. When perspective realism portrays the role of rhetoric as describing in language the world from the perspective of the "individual rhetor" it locates the method and potential by which real world rhetoric

sustains social movements and offers the possibility of social amelioration, because rhetors "strive to make individual perspectives embraceable by others" (Cherwitz and Hikins 1986, 108). In doing so, they may work to eliminate misunderstanding, promote tolerance, and encourage the solution of common problems.

The nature of the process of making a perspective embraceable by others and using a rhetorical vision to gain converts and sustaining the converted is essentially the same. The process involves linguistically describing the vision/perspective in terms that the auditor can understand and "relate to." Here I am using the phrase "relate to" as a technical phrase. We have already seen the importance of *the relation* in the philosophy of perspective realism. When perspective realism becomes the basis of the rhetorical theory know as rhetorical perspectivism it does so in large measure as the result of a *relational theory of meaning*. As noted above, according to rhetorical perspectivism, language functions to "make relations conspicuous" to auditors, this is how rhetors bring an audience to "share" their perspective. To accomplish this goal, the rhetors must be consistent with what the audience holds to be true about the life world in which they reside. This is partly a function of what Walter Fisher calls narrative fidelity and narrative coherence, but it goes beyond Fisher's view to include the effects of those aspects of reality that are not created by, or are merely a function of, belief. It includes the impinging of extra - human reality as well. In getting the auditor to understand and relate to the vision/perspective, the

goal of the rhetor is to have the auditor accept that vision/perspective and join the rhetor as a member of the group that shares it also. We could say that "relating to" goes back to sharing consciousness of the perspective/vision which we discussed earlier. But is must be stressed that this includes the effect of new information reality presents us which inevitably alters or "corrects' our vision.

III. Perspectivism applied.

Now that we have examined the philosophical foundations of perspective realism as a grounding for the rhetorical criticism methodology of fantasy theme analysis, and noted its similarities and differences with rhetorical perspectivism, let us examine how fantasy theme analysis, in this philosophically grounded form, could be applied to actual rhetorical criticism. Cherwitz and Hikins call for perspectivist analysis of rhetoric through an "active seeking out of perspective" (1983, 266), that is, by carefully tracing out how a text paints a linguistic description of reality. They recommend that relevant perspectives should be "discovered, evaluated and juxtaposed" (1983, 266). Bormann sets out his methodology in his 1972 article as simply describing the fantasy themes, clarifying the rhetorical vision, and interpreting it by comparing it to reality and other visions. The two methods seem to be quite comparable. The critic gets at perspectives through discovering, evaluating, and juxtaposing; and the critic gets at visions through describing, clarifying, and interpreting. While the precise meaning of these terms are not equivalent, they are close enough to illustrate the

compatibility of the two approaches. In the remainder of this essay, I seek to briefly illustrate how the method of fantasy theme analysis, augmented by the principles of rhetorical perspectivism, might be applied to the analysis of rhetoric.

Cherwitz and Hikins describe three advantages of a "perspective analysis" (1983, 265): 1) Disagreement can be understood in terms of differing perspectives and resolution made possible by comparing and contrasting perspectives; one could, for instance, call Nixon a good or bad president depending on what aspect of his administration one looks at; 2) Analysis can be made of different perspectives on the same issue, and it can be determined whether those differences are merely a function of two (or more) issues instead of one. For example, the abortion issue can be different for those who look at it from "the perspective of the pregnant woman" and for those who look at it from the "perspective of the unborn child"; 3) Perspectival analysis can yield insights as to why argument stops or reaches an impasse, as an understanding of perspective is always a *relative* notion, that is relative to a common object of discourse and specific points of *stasis* in the perspectives of the participants. A perspectival analysis, then can account for why the dialectical process has become dysfunctional, broken down, and illuminate what aspects of the controversy must be explored before the debate can continue.

If the critic were to examine the fantasy themes portraying Nixon as a good president and those portraying him as a bad president, the critic would look for dramatistic elements in that

theme and find that the scenes in which Nixon is portrayed typically focused on quite different aspects of his presidency, perhaps foreign affairs versus domestic policy. Any one or more dramatistic elements in a fantasy might be the point of difference, thus we have advantage #1 of understanding rhetorical differences in terms of perspectives on one or more aspects of an issue. It seems that fantasy theme analysis based in perspectivism could yield a detailed understanding of the nature and complexity of those differences.

By examining the rhetoric on both sides of the emotionally charged abortion issue fantasy theme analysis based in perspectivism would show the discourse associated with two diametrically different roles, roles assigned to the woman and unborn in the themes. A deeper understanding of the respective visions would develop from realizing that the difference in these roles stems from a focus on two different objects of discourse. And so advantage #2 can be seen in fantasy theme analysis based on perspectivism.

An important contribution of our augmented fantasy theme analysis is in its ability to make significant assessments of differences in perspectives, to locate disagreements. As argued earlier, a fantasy theme approach grounded in perspective realism must give reality presumption in order to have something with which to compare visions. By doing so, the critic gets at advantage #3; points of impasse can be identified in terms of points where visions are incompatible, where one person or group's perspective of reality will not allow for the perspective

of the other, because to do so is incoherent or inconsistent with known or impinging reality. By understanding those different dramatistic elements in the controversy, arguers can understand why they have differences, and work toward ways to solve them.

It is not within the scope of this essay to provide extensive proof of the relationship between perspective realism and fantasy theme analysis. Several tasks have been left undone and future research could tackle them. One suggestion for further research could be a study of the applications of fantasy theme analysis in scholarly journals to see if the components of perspectivism I identified in Bormann's theory is evidenced in its application. If my contention is valid, and Bormann and scholars following his methods, unknowingly have been working under the purview of perspectivism, then the results of the criticism will be consistent with that philosophy and its critical method as summarized here, and will not reveal thoroughgoing intersubjectivist and relativist analysis.

Another direction might be to see what a rhetorical analysis would look like when a critic approaches the same material analyzed by fantasy theme analysis with a method explicitly based on perspective realism. Such an approach would offer a good opportunity to test the assertions in this essay.

Finally, one might explore how fantasy theme analysis and the theory of symbolic convergence might adapt to what some see as the coming age of neo-modernism. As Francis Fukuyama and others have suggested, we may be casting off the postmodern world view. In its place, some believe will be an intellectual age

more like the enlightenment, with higher confidence in human's ability to know and deal with the world in which they reside. If such predictions are sound, rhetorical theories based on subjectivist or relativist theories may well fall out of favor to be replaced with more realist based theories. Fantasy theme analysis, to me, seems to be in an excellent position to survive and adapt to any such change in intellectual current.

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